



June 22, 2021

To the Honorable Governor Baker, Senate Clerk Hurley and House Clerk James:

Subject: Rural Policy Advisory Commission FY21 Annual Report

Per the legislation that created the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, please accept this annual summary that “reports the results of [the Rural Policy Advisory Commission’s] findings and activities of the preceding year and its recommendations to the governor and to the clerks of the senate and house of representatives.”

Like everyone and every public body, COVID 19 created an unexpected and demanding workload for many members of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC) that made focused attention on RPAC issues difficult. Despite this, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission met six times in Fiscal Year 21 focusing on topics that addressed the goals and recommendations of the 2019 Massachusetts Rural Policy Plan (RPP) and to identify legislative priorities that would enhance the economic vitality of rural communities, especially as rural municipalities struggle to recover from the social, health and economic impacts of the pandemic. The meetings and agendas were:

October 9, 2020

RPP Priority Focus – Economic Development

- a. Overview of pre and post COVID-19 economy in select rural areas of MA
- b. Local business technical assistance efforts in rural MA
- c. Discussion and review of efforts and RPP Goals

December 11, 2020

RPP Priority Focus: Housing and Population Trends. What data do we need to discern trends, issues and problems related to housing and population in rural MA?

- Review of eviction and foreclosure data, and summary of findings from MHP’s recent rural housing workshops
- Review of data from Massachusetts Association of Realtors
- Review of other data sources (i.e. building permit, Cape seasonal housing survey, DOR, climate migration)

January 14

RPAC 2021 Legislative Priorities

February 12

RPP Priority Focus: Economic Development

- The new Rural Development Fund and One Stop for Growth

RPP Priority Focus: Broadband.

- Last mile progress and MBI new digital literacy COVID recovery program

April 9

RPP Priority Focus: Municipal Governance

- Police Reform and training requirements on part-time forces – discussion of potential funding for rural municipalities and how to allocate

Office of Rural Policy Job Description

June 9, 2021

Discussion of 2022 Museum on Main Street Collaboration of Smithsonian and Mass Humanities “Crossroads: Change in Rural America”

Review of FY21 for Annual Report and Setting of FY22 meetings and goals

In addition, the RPAC spent each meeting identifying and discussing legislative priorities; provided written and/or verbal testimony, letters of support and advocacy; and participated in the following in FY21:

- Rural issues related to the Transportation and Climate Initiative
- RPAC FY21 legislative priorities
- DESE Local Contribution comment letter
- Support for Office of Rural Policy
- Economic Development Bond testimony
- Rural TDI model with MassDevelopment
- Member of Rural School Commission
- Support and feedback on Broadband Commission
- Redistricting testimony

Recommendations:

1. Create and fund an Office of Rural Policy.
2. Ensure that the unique needs of rural Massachusetts are thoughtfully considered prior to the development and enactment of policy and legislation, and include RPAC representation on study commissions.
3. Ensure that the distribution of the state’s apportionment of American Rescue Plan Act funding includes a rural factor; supports transformative one-time expenditures;

encourages regional solutions to local problems, especially in rural areas; and that a rural perspective has a seat at the funding decision table.

In addition, the RPAC recommends:

4. Reform the formula used to distribute Payments in Lieu of Taxes for State-Owned Land as per Auditor Bump's recent analysis of PILOT payment inequity, especially to rural municipalities.
5. Support and fund improvements to local and regional public health systems.
6. Re-create the Transformation Development Initiative created by MassDevelopment for Gateway Cities to be used in rural sub-region and support the Rural Jobs Act – both measures to improve rural economies.
7. Support the study and the findings of the Rural School Commission.
8. Advance equity for rural communities by helping rural communities get more access to critical state grant funds.
9. Address transportation and climate impacts in rural areas by creating a special fund for dirt and gravel road maintenance; increasing the deeds excise tax for climate change adaptation infrastructure; and addressing the need to diversify farmland opportunities to combat climate change.
10. Help expand housing opportunities in rural areas by increasing funds available for affordable and workforce housing development and changing state housing program guidelines and funding to be more cognizant of rural housing development constraints.

This annual report is submitted by the members of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission:

Linda Dunlavy, Chair, from and representing the Franklin Regional Council of Governments
Jay Coburn, Vice Chair, Community Development Partnership, representing the Cape Cod Commission

Representative Paul Mark, Speaker of the House Designee

Corrine Fitzgerald, Senate President Designee

Helena Fruscio-Altsman, Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Designee

Tom Matuszko from and representing the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

Trish Settles from and representing the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission

Bill Veno from and representing the Martha's Vineyard Regional Planning Commission

Shaun Sukowski, Town of Athol and representing the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission

Wendy Hudson, Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission

Judy Terry, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission

Dave Christopolis, Hilltown Community Development Corporation and Governor's Appointment

Sara Smiarowski, Governor's Appointment